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14 March 1986

 France: Legislative Elections and Beyond -  
 Alternative Scenario 

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The recent Socialist surge in opinion polls has prompted us to consider possible alternative outcomes to next Sunday's French legislative elections. We still believe the most likely outcome is that conservatives of the Gaullist/Centrist coalition will achieve a workable majority, initiating a period of "cohabitation" between a still-powerful Socialist president and a conservative prime minister. In this paper, we assess this likely outcome and three alternatives and consider how the personalities and goals of key players would interact to shape cohabitation.

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Latest Poll Results

Latest polls -- the last that are allowed to be published before the French election next Sunday -- suggest that the Socialists will reach their goal of 30 percent of the popular vote and retain their status as the largest single party in France, even though they will lose their majority in parliament to the Conservatives. (See Figure 1) We continue to believe that the Gaullist/Centrist alliance will garner a workable majority, but it now looks like it will be slim enough -- 20-30 seats more than an absolute majority -- to allow President Mitterrand plenty of maneuvering room on personnel appointments and policy. The apparent closeness of the balloting and the likely precariousness of the political balance of power afterwards make it worthwhile to examine closely a range of election possibilities and how they are likely to affect the uneasily cohabitation that probably will follow.

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This memorandum was prepared for Tyrus Cobb, National Security Council, by  Office of European Analysis. Questions and comments are welcome and may be addressed to  Chief, West European Division, .

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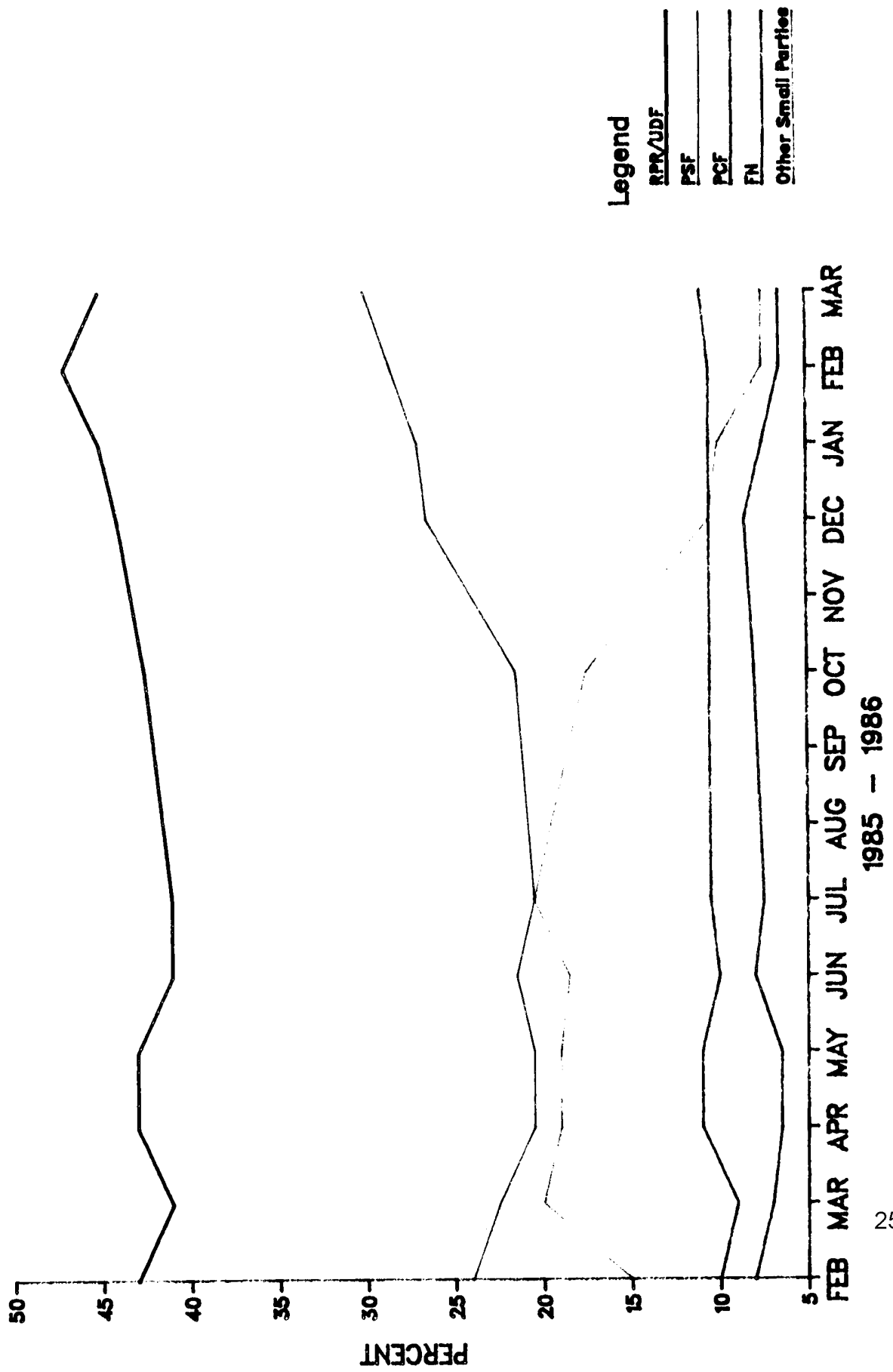
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FIGURE 1

# EVOLUTION OF VOTER INTENTIONS OVER THE PAST YEAR



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From Paris Match/BVA Polls

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### Election Possibilities

A workable conservative majority remains the best bet, but our sense of the drift of voter preference is that the margin of victory will be modest -- probably 20-30 seats above an absolute majority. Wielding such a majority will require caution, both in coordinating positions between parties of the coalition and in arranging a modus vivendi with Mitterrand. Although the conservatives will be able to count on parliamentary support from the extremist National Front -- which could wind up with at least 15 seats -- the key to making such a majority work will lie above all in enforcing discipline especially in the loosely knit centrist grouping of parties known as the Union for French Democracy (UDF). A key indicator will be how artful the Gaullists and Centrists are in negotiating the division of spoils after their victory; the more smoothly the appointment of cabinet and lesser officials goes, the better it would augur for coordination in implementing policy. [redacted]

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In this scenario, Paris Mayor Jacques Chirac -- who, as leader of the neo-Gaullists, heads the largest and most disciplined party of the coalition -- will probably claim the prime ministry. If, as we believe, Chirac is willing to make significant concessions to his Centrist colleagues on both appointments and policy, he would be able to protect his majority well enough to confront Mitterrand forcefully. Given the right's decline in the polls, Chirac and Centrist leaders are probably spending the remaining time before the election cutting deals to make a 20-seat majority workable from the very first. [redacted]

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A slim center-right majority -- say 5 or 10 seats -- would leave Mitterrand with plenty of opportunities to sow discord in conservative ranks. Most important, top conservative leaders like Chirac and Giscard would tend to shy away from leading such a shaky government because it could damage their bids for the presidency in 1988. This would leave Mitterrand free to choose a compromising personality who would insure the government's deference to his continued command of both defense and foreign affairs. Mitterrand's old friend, former prime minister Jacques Chaban-Delmas of the Centrist Simone Veil are most frequently mentioned in this role. [redacted]

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If the conservatives failed to muster a majority, there would probably be a minority government of the center-left, dominated by Socialists. Short of a significant conservative misstep in the final week of the campaign, we believe this outcome is unlikely. [redacted]

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The conservative landslide that seemed so certain six months ago, now is even less likely than a minority government. A major disaster on the foreign policy front [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] would be the conservatives' best hope. This outcome would be an anomaly in France, however, where foreign affairs seldom influence votes. Clearly a majority of 35 seats or more would give conservatives the strength to press Mitterrand very hard without risking the loss of key votes in parliament because of leftist sympathies among some centrist deputies. In this situation, we would expect the conservatives soon to dominate foreign and defense policy as well as domestic affairs. [REDACTED]

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### The Shape of Cohabitation

The shape of cohabitation will be determined to a large extent by how the votes fall on Sunday, but the best evidence suggests strongly that powersharing under a workable conservative majority is the most likely outcome. [REDACTED]

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The first task facing the new government will be to appoint a new cabinet. This first test of powersharing will include not only the selection of a new prime minister (which the conservatives will seek to influence), but also the painful process of apportioning countless ministries, subministries, and staff jobs. It will force the two ruling parties to work out a modus vivendi on policy -- not only with Mitterrand but between themselves. [REDACTED]

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Beyond this, informed speculation appears to agree only that cohabitation will be invented as Mitterrand and the new government move cautiously forward into the unknown.

Although the shape that this cohabitation will take remains dim, we can make some guesses based on our knowledge of the political leaders who are likely to play a key role in defining it:

- It will probably work in the short-term. Mitterrand has the final word constitutionally about the duration of the experiment, since only he can dissolve parliament and call early elections. He will use this power cautiously, in our view, because once he has done it he must wait one year before doing it again. It seems doubtful that he will be able to amass a case against the right to put before the voters in less than a year. He also needs time to quell the fires of factionalism that are beginning to rage within his Socialist Party.
- For their part, those conservative leaders who have opted to cohabit with Mitterrand stand to gain most by succeeding in the effort; their failure to work with the President would only play into the hands of Raymond Barre, who has rejected cohabitation, arguing that it cannot work.
- The logic of the situation seems to recommend compromise. Chirac's reticence to attack Mitterrand harshly in the election campaign lends credence to reports that his staffers and Mitterrand's aides have already laid the basis for cooperation. This compromise would reportedly give the government authority over domestic policy, while leaving Mitterrand in command of foreign and security affairs.
- While it lasts, cohabitation will be a curious mixture of compromise and vicious rivalry. All of the major political leaders will have at least one eye firmly fixed on the presidential contest set for 1988.

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-- The end of the experiment will probably come when either President or Prime Minister decides the time is appropriate for early elections -- legislative, presidential or both. Our best guess is that cohabitation will last at least one year, but that elections will be called well before the deadline for the presidential election in May 1988. While only Barre has any incentive to hurry a presidential contest, every player is likely to adjust his basic attitudes toward cohabitation constantly in light of how it is playing in the provinces. As the presidential election deadline approaches, we believe Mitterrand will be increasingly tempted to take advantage of any slip by the government to call elections. To preempt him, the Prime Minister may try to force Mitterrand into a corner where he must sacrifice power or resign. [REDACTED]

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#### Outlook for US Interests

In the heightened tensions of the cohabitation period, any US initiative risks becoming a political football between left and right. To this extent, French foreign policy will be less predictable than usual. At the same time, however, radical swings of policy are improbable, and the lethargy that such cautiousness can breed may make it difficult for US officials to get quick responses from Paris on any issue. [REDACTED]

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